

Sleepaway by roady

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

It's been two years since Mike and Will have spoken when he finds the box while cleaning out his closet. Mike is determined to fix things before their last summer in Hawkins slips away--he just has to figure out what he wants and who he is first.

Sleepaway

Author's Note:

Hi! Just a quick note on content: this story acknowledges the existence of sex, although no one is depicted having it. Some underage alcohol consumption takes place. There are mentions of period-typical homophobia, a few uses of the f-slur, and mentions of the existence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. If you see a content warning that's needed that I missed, let me know, and I'll add it here.

Hope you enjoy the story :)

“Mom.”

“Michael, I’m serious.”

“This is... Cruel and unusual!”

Karen let out a small, exasperated exhalation of air that Mike returned tenfold.

“Look, Mike, I know you think you’re all grown up because you’re about to leave for college, but you have 2 months left under this roof and until that fateful day comes, what I say still goes. Clean. Out. This. Room.”

“But I—“

“No ‘buts’!” She effectively ended the argument by slamming Mike’s door shut. He turned on his heel, clenched his jaw, and fell face first onto his bed.

Mike always felt childish and embarrassed after one of these shouting matches, like he was 13 again and trying to justify stealing quarters from Nancy’s piggy bank. Something about these simple arguments always escalated out of control. Mike could feel it rising up inside him like bile.

After wallowing for a good 10 minutes, he rolled over onto his back and surveyed his childhood bedroom. He’d never been good at letting go of things. Boxes and bags of papers, comics, toys, books, and more overflowed in various corners of the room and spilled out of the closet.

His mother had made it very clear that she wanted all of it gone before he left for university at the end of August. *My very own home aerobics room*, she’d intoned, wistfully.

He sighed, grabbed the box of trash bags his mom had brought up and tried to get started.

He reached into the closet, pulled out the nearest cardboard box, and removed a manilla envelope so stuffed full of paper it practically disintegrated when he touched it, covering the floor with its contents.

Mike rolled his eyes and knelt down, picking up the nearest sheet of

paper. It was his own handwriting, but younger and more carefully scripted.

July 14 1982

Dear Will,

Hi from Camp Good Fellow!

My mom sent me off with a whole load of paper and stamps and envelopes, so I'm writing letters.

It feels weird not being able to call you guys up on the two way radio. Are you going to do any campaigns without me?

Let's go see Tron when I get home!

Your friend,

Mike

PS: I've always wanted to write a letter that had a PS.

Mike smiled for a split-second before his stomach dropped. He knew this box. He chewed his lip and started sifting through more of the papers. Drawings in crayon and scraps of notes passed in class.

He sighed, picked it up and placed it on his bed before continuing with the others piles, leaving Will's box untouched. He spent the next few hours filling three trash bags with things he could hardly believe he'd saved. Although he still refused to believe his mother had been right.

As the afternoon faded into evening he remembered he'd promised to meet Dustin and Lucas at the diner on the other side of town. He grabbed his things and the bags he'd already filled, heading downstairs and avoiding his mother's satisfied expression in the kitchen.

"Thank you, Michael!" She called after him.

Dropping the trash bags at the curb, he slid into the driver's seat of his '82 Corolla and made his way downtown. He rolled the driver's side window down in attempt to catch a cool breeze, but the humidity sapped away any 'refreshing' sensation.

When he pulled up to the curb he saw Lucas wave through the plate glass window.

"What took you so long? I thought we said we were meeting at 4 PM." Dustin threw his hands up in the air and looked at Mike expectantly.

“My mom’s making me clean out my room before I leave,” Mike said as he slid into the booth at the restaurant.

“Why?” Dustin asked through a mouthful of tortilla chips.

“She’s turning it into an aerobics room.” Lucas laughed and Mike made a face at him before continuing.

“You know what I found while cleaning tonight?”

“The \$20 you owe me?” Dustin sneered.

“Pretty sure it’s the other way around, Dustin, but no. I found...” Mike hesitated. “I found the box. Will’s box”.

“Ohhh,” Dustin and Lucas said in unison.

“The breakup box,” Lucas clarified.

“It’s not—We didn’t—“ Mike protested.

“Dustin! Table 18!” A booming voice from the back of the restaurant startled them and Dustin jumped to his feet.

“Sorry guys, duty calls.” He grabbed a grey plastic tub from beside the booth and slipped away. Mike glanced at his watch.

“Shit, it’s 4:45 already? I must’ve lost track of time when I was cleaning,” he groaned. “I have to get to work, too. Sorry, Lucas.”

“It’s cool. I’m just gonna stay right here, not doing shit,” he shot Mike a self-satisfied expression before pulling a couple of comic books out of his bag. Mike groaned.

“I can’t believe your parents don’t make you get a summer job.”

“It’s because they actually love me.”

Mike made a dismissive sound. “Please.” Lucas punched him in the arm and he ducked away with an exaggerated wince.

“Can you clear my late fees again?” Lucas called after him.

Mike flipped him the bird, pushed the glass door of the diner open, and grimaced as he stepped back out into the humid summer evening. The sweat on the backs of his legs immediately stuck to the pleather driver’s seat on the short ride to Blockbuster. Inside the shop, the air conditioning was no match for the lingering evening heat.

"It's so fucking hot in here, Bruce," Mike groaned as soon as he stepped in the door.

"Hello to you too, man." Bruce scratched at one of the perennial ingrown hairs under his jaw. Mike sometimes wondered if he shaved with a piece of broken glass.

"Here's the restocking," Bruce grunted, pulling a plastic bin full of VHS cases from under the counter.

"Thanks for not doing any of that before I got here."

"You're welcome. Alright, well, I'm out of here."

"I still can't believe John is making us work these weeknight shifts alone. This is bullshit," Mike grumbled as he ducked behind the counter and quickly pulled off his t-shirt and swapped it for a Blockbuster polo. Bruce shrugged.

"Don't try to understand the decisions of middle management, Mike, or you won't make it far in retail." Bruce pulled a baseball cap over his snarl of curly hair and pushed the door open, the synthetic chime ringing through the empty store.

"Definitely not trying to do that," Mike muttered as he logged into the cash terminal. A minute or two later the door chimed again and Mike looked up expecting to see a disgruntled Bruce looking for his keys.

“Oh, hi, Mike!” Joyce Byers smiled.

“Ms. Byers, hi,” Mike felt a flush rise on the back of his neck.

“You can just call me Joyce, Mike, really,” She signed wistfully. “Every time I see you, you look more grown up.” Mike smiled, but felt strangely sad.

“Joyce, right. It’s nice to see you too—”

“You never come by the house anymore. You should! Will’s such a bookworm these days. Always locked in his room reading...” She looked away for a minute, her cheerful expression faltering, before clutching her bag closer and continuing. “Anyway, it’s movie night! Do you have anything new you’d recommend?”

“Oh, sure. Have you seen *Beetlejuice*? It’s pretty good. Um, if you’re looking for something funny, there’s *A Fish Called Wanda*.”

While Joyce wandered around the store for 10 minutes or so, Mike meditated on how best to casually ask about Will. Instead, when she finally came up to the counter he startled and blurted out, “How’s Will?”

“Oh! Um, he’s fine. Just, like I mentioned. Always in his room, reading, making artwork. He’s been accepted to the Art Institute in

Chicago, I'm not sure if you knew—“

“Really?” Mike felt a surge of pride. “That’s great!”

“Thank you. We’re—I’m really proud. I even convinced his father to help him pay for it,” she said, more to herself than to Mike. She paused for a minute, studying Mike’s face until he began to feel a flush creep up the back of his neck.

“You should come by, Mike, really. I *know* he would be happy to see you.”

“I’m not so sure...”

Joyce reached out and grabbed his hand. “Look, Michael... I know that you two haven’t been that close in recent years, but I really think you’d regret it if you didn’t spend some time together this summer. Who knows, he might go off to Chicago and never come back to boring old Hawkins.” She laughed weakly.

“I think you’re right, Ms. By—um, Joyce.”

Time dragged by for the remainder of Mike’s shift. He glanced at his watch over and over until he was certain the minutes were moving in reverse.

After 20 minutes with no customers and the restocking done, he

reached into his pocket and pulled out a stack of paper, rubber-banded together. He pulled one sheet out, unfolded it, and began to read.

July 19, 1982

Dear Will,

How are you?

Mom says you should open letter by talking about the weather. It's hot here and there's no AC. I hope it rains.

I had a dream about you this week. We were playing in the woods near your house and you fell into a hole. I tried to help you get out but it just kept getting deeper and deeper. I yelled but your mom couldn't hear us, and then you started screaming and I woke up.

It turns out another boy was having a nightmare and shouted in his sleep and woke a bunch of us up.

But I couldn't get back to sleep after.

Today I'm going to learn to canoe.

I am counting and I have (12 tally marks) mosquito bites.

Your friend,

Mike

PS: Thank you for the drawing!!

When he had finally clocked out and locked up Mike felt mentally exhausted.

He sat in the car for a good five minutes, staring into space before cranking the engine and driving the familiar route to the Byers house.

When he reached the driveway he had a fleeting moment of doubt. Would Will actually want to see him? He dug his fingernails into the steering wheel before stepping out of the car. He glanced at the main door, but the house was dark. He chewed the inside of his cheek before making his way to the side yard where Will's window was. His light was on.

Mike took a deep breath and tapped three times, softly, on the window pane. He waited, mindlessly scratching a mosquito bite. He was just about to knock again when Will's face appeared in the window.

"Mike?" he could see him say, more than hear. He pushed up the

window and stared at him.

“Hey, Will,” Mike hesitated. “Is this weird? This is probably really weird.”

“It is... Fairly weird, yes,” Will said slowly.

“Good weird or bad weird?”

“Haven’t decided yet.”

Mike hesitated. “Can I come in?” Will nodded and reached outside to help him climb up. Mike ignored the feeling of warmth pooling in his stomach when Will grabbed his hand.

When he was standing inside Will’s room he could hardly recognize it. So many new posters and Will’s watercolor paintings had replaced the crayon drawings of their childhood. When he turned to face Will, he noticed for the first time that he was now a full head taller than the youngest Byers, who looked thinner than he’d remembered.

“How—“

“Why—“

They both began at once and then stopped, embarrassed.

“You go first,” Will insisted.

“Oh, OK. Um,” standing inside the Byers’s home for the first time in years, Mike felt his confidence begin to drain away. “How are you?”

Will laughed out loud. “Is that really what you came to ask?” Mike felt a mixture of embarrassment and relief as Will’s smile dissolved some of the tension.

“Sort of... Sounds kind of ridiculous, hearing it out loud.” He looked down and gripped the back of his neck with his palm, trying to cover up the red flushed skin he could feel pricking upwards towards his ears. Will observed him for a moment and then went and sat on his bed. Mike glanced around before pulling a chair out from under Will’s desk.

“Well, I’m doing fine, if that’s really what you came for,” Will said, tucking his feet under himself. He was wearing an old, thin shirt and gym shorts, but still had a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead.

“I heard you got accepted to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I still keep all of the drawings you gave me. I always knew you would do something great.” The tops of Will’s ears turned bright red as Mike was speaking, which made Mike’s heart race a bit.

“Thanks, Mike,” he said, with some genuine affection, although his

expression was still weary.

“Um, listen,” Mike hesitated, grasping at some valid excuse to have barged into Will’s room that evening. He made a cursory glance around the room, stopping when he spotted a rolled up sleeping bag lurking in the closet. “I actually came here to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“Me and Dustin and Lucas are going on a camping trip to celebrate graduation and we wanted to know if you would come too,” he spoke quickly and silently prayed Will couldn’t see through his bullshit.

“Oh, wow. Really? I don’t know, Mike,” he scratched the back of his neck and looked up at him, skeptical. Mike gripped the back of the chair tightly before standing up and crossing the room to sit next to Will on the bed. Will’s face was unreadable.

“I also really wanted to say that... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for all the stuff that happened before. I feel like such an asshole.” Will was silent but glassy eyed, refusing to meet Mike’s gaze.

Mike reached out to touch Will’s hand on the bed, startling them both when a snap of static electricity passed between them. Will laughed nervously, but some of the tension seemed to dissolve.

“I’m not asking you to forgive me, just to spend some time together? Like we used to? Before we both leave...”

“It’s really hard to say ‘no’ you,” Will said, mostly to himself, his voice just above a whisper.

“So... Is that a yes?” Mike asked with a hopeful smile. Will glanced up at him and rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

“Okay, yes.” Mike leaned forward and gave him a quick hug.

“Yes, thank you! Really, we’re going to have fun, I promise,” he insisted. Will nodded with only a hint of skepticism, his cheeks pink.

They chatted for a little bit afterward, until Will started yawning and Mike took the hint. He said goodnight and awkwardly climbed back out of his window. When he had gotten a few steps from the car he glanced back and saw Will watching him. He waved uncertainly, a motion that Will returned after a couple of beats before the window went dark.

Sitting in the car he felt his relief melt away. *A camping trip? What the hell was he thinking? Nothing like the pressure cooker of sharing a small tent in the middle of nowhere to heal your broken relationship with your best friend.*

Mike groaned and let his head drop to the steering wheel a little too roughly. “Ow,” he said softly, to no one.

After a few minutes of moping, he turned the ignition and drove back to his house, contemplating the best way to broach this topic with Dustin and Lucas. They would either accept it and help him without a second thought or call him an asshole, but still offer to help.

The latter turned out to be more true—Dustin was excited but made no attempt to hide his obvious frustration with Mike over the whole ordeal. Lucas was more reticent.

“Mike, I’m going to be honest: this sounds like a terrible idea.”

“Lucas—” Dustin began, already exasperated, “this might be their only chance to fix things. Ever! I mean, think about it. We’ll all be halfway across the country soon. There’s not a lot of time left.” Mike swallowed nervously, suddenly bearing in mind the weight of his plan and the potential fallout.

“I’m not saying they shouldn’t try to work things out, just that this weird emotional Trojan Horse is like... Not the best vehicle.” Lucas absentmindedly picked at a loose cuticle.

Mike slumped forward for a moment, letting his head fall onto his forearms, folded on the formica tabletop of the diner. He could hear Dustin and Lucas bickering, just above a whisper. After a few moments he sat back up, running his hands over his face.

“Okay,” Lucas said, with some degree of finality. “We’ve decided to help you. But we have a few conditions—”

“You have to apologize. A lot!”

“Of course I’ll—“ Mike began, but Dustin interrupted.

“No, Mike, let us finish. What you did to Will was really shitty, and he deserves a real, honest-to-God apology. Not like, ‘don’t cut all the hair off your sister’s dolls, now say you’re sorry’ type apology—“ Lucas made a face.

“Oh my God, Dustin, Erica forgave me for that!” Dustin rolled his eyes and made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

“Anyway,” he continued, glaring at Lucas, “if Erica can only *just* get over how shitty of a brother Lucas is—“

“Dustin, I swear to God—“

“Then you know you’ve got a lot of making up to do.”

Mike sighed heavily. “I know,” he said, at last.

“Okay, but the second thing is,” Lucas added, “is we’re going to help you with that too.”

“We’re going to plan the perfect camping trip ever.” Dustin punctuated each of the last four words with a slap on the table top.

They spent the next half hour before Mike had to work discussing everything from the perfect location (“it needs to be a bit of a hike-in, you know, for privacy”), the best food to bring (“stuff that Will would actually want to eat and a lot of s’mores supplies, obviously”), and some cool music to listen to (“if it gets boring—or awkward”).

Mike felt mostly reassured after their conversation, at least of the logistics. The actual hard part, telling Will all of the very genuine and messy emotions he had to share and making amends—that bit was still terrifying.

The next day, Mike resolved to call Will and tell him a bit about the plan he and Lucas and Dustin had cooked up. He took the phone off the hook and then put it back. He repeated this pattern 5 more times before finally making an exasperated sound, putting the phone to his ear, and punching in the Bylers’s home number.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Ms—Joyce. Um, it’s Mike Wheeler.”

“Mike!” Joyce chirped at the other end of the line, her voice a mixture of surprise and delight. “Do you want to speak to Will?”

“Uh, yes, please, thanks.”

She told him to wait just a moment, laying the receiver down on the kitchen table. He could hear her shuffling around, calling out for Will. He tried to ignore how sweaty his hands were, barely gripping the increasingly slippery plastic casing of the receiver.

“Hello?” Will’s voice sounded so much deeper on the other end, he briefly thought it was Jonathan.

“Hey, it’s Mike.”

“Oh, hey. Uh, what’s up?”

“I was just calling to tell you we picked a date for the camping trip.”

“Oh, cool, um, when is it?”

“It’s not this weekend but next. Can you—can you still make it?” He could hear Will hesitating on the other end of the line. He had to physically restrain himself from adding ‘please’.

“Uh, yeah. Yes. I can make it.”

“Great!” He said, too loudly and too quickly. He heard muffled sounds in the background and realized Joyce was telling Will to invite him to dinner.

“Just a second, Mike.” Will had clearly covered the receiver with his hand, but Mike could hear almost every word exchanged. Joyce insisted, Will resisted, but after taking a deep breath he asked, “hey, do you want to come to dinner at my house? Mom’s made spaghetti and there’s plenty.”

The last bit felt like Joyce, verbatim, which made Mike grin. “Yeah, thanks, that sounds great. I’ll be over soon.”

“OK, um. See you.”

Mike sighed with relief as he hung up, trying to ignore the nagging guilt of having fabricated the camping trip. He thought for a second, then looked down at his outfit. He’d spent most of the day in his pajamas, reading. He stood up and went into the bathroom just down the hall, observing his mussed hair and the sheen of sweat on his face.

He took a quick shower, shaved his face, and dug around in his closet for fifteen minutes looking for something semi-attractive to wear. He dressed twice before selecting a short sleeved plaid shirt, open over a white t-shirt, and flat front khaki shorts he usually reserved for work. He made a vain attempt to tame his hair which, while cleaner, did not appear any less disheveled after showering.

At length, he rolled his eyes at himself in the mirror. *It’s just Will.* Somehow he didn’t find this reassuring.

He arrived at the Byers’s house right on time. He hesitated for a moment when he reached the door, almost opening it without

knocking out of habit. Just as he was about to ring the doorbell, Joyce appeared.

“Hey, Mike,” she said affectionately, opening her arms to wrap him up in a hug. He didn’t resist, leaning into the embrace and thinking of a time when he was only tall enough to wrap his arms around her waist.

Inside, Will was setting the table. “Hey,” Mike said, softly. He knew it had been Joyce, not Will, who extended this dinner invitation, but he was hoping to use it as an opportunity to get off on the right foot before the camping trip.

“Hey,” Will responded, more relaxed than Mike had anticipated.

“Um, can I help with anything?” He asked, his arms hanging uselessly at his sides. Joyce appeared behind him with a bowl of salad.

“Oh, no, no, Mike. We’re all set. Just take a seat.”

Dinner went better than expected. Will was relaxed and Joyce was so interested in what Mike had been up to, there weren’t any awkward lags in conversation.

Mike told her he was excited to be attending Purdue’s computer science program, one of the oldest in the country, but admitted he was a little nervous to be going off to school all by himself. Dustin and Lucas were headed to MIT and UC Berkley, respectively.

“Well, it’s nice that you’ll be close to home.” She paused before adding, “And to Chicago too. It’s just a few hours by train.”

“Congratulations again on getting into SAIC, Will.”

“Thanks,” Will said, smiling with some genuine affection. Will had been watching Mike with softer eyes than he had the other evening and Mike felt a spark of hope that he stood a chance of repairing the damage he’d done.

“Yeah, we are just so proud.” She beamed at Will. “I’m going to miss him, of course, but...” She ran her thumb up and down her fork absentmindedly. “You have to fly the nest some time.”

“I’ll come home lots, Mom, don’t worry.”

“I know, I know. It’s just different when you’re not living at home.”

When they were finished with dinner, Mike helped clean up, standing side by side with Will washing dishes. He let their elbows brush together every so often, relishing in the closeness that he’d missed in the last few years.

When they were done the kitchen was warm and humid. Will reached into the fridge and made them each a glass of iced tea. Joyce headed to bed shortly thereafter, giving them each a quick hug and a kiss and

telling Will not to stay up too late.

“Do you, um, do you want to see some of my portfolio that I sent to SAIC?”

“Yes!” Mike said, alarming both of them slightly with his eagerness. “I mean, um, yeah, that would be really cool.”

They retired to his room and Will pulled out a large portfolio case, opening it and carefully removing a mixture of watercolor paintings and charcoal drawings. Mike was stunned by how much his art had progressed in such a short time. Dreamlike vistas, moody still lifes, and life drawings that looked so real he felt like he could reach out and touch them. One in particular, a self-portrait in a mixture of pencil and ink, fleshed out with textured crosshatched shadows, was hauntingly beautiful.

“This one is amazing,” Mike whispered, mostly to himself.

“Thank you.” Will hesitated, biting his lip before adding, “You know, you were always the person who encouraged me the most when I was a kid to draw. Other than my mom of course... I really appreciated that.”

“That’s because I always knew you were incredible.” Even in the dimly lit room, Mike could see the color rise in Will’s cheeks. “Now everybody is going to know,” He added, smiling. Will reached up and clasped the back of his neck, clearly embarrassed, but Mike found he didn’t care. He meant every word.

They sat in silence for a time after, Mike flipping carefully through Will's portfolio pieces. Every so often he'd catch Will watching him closely, and he'd meet his eyes and smile before he had a chance to look away.

"Hey, um," Mike paused for a second, running his tongue along his teeth. "Are you dating anyone right now?" Will choked on the tea he was drinking, spluttering and staring at Mike in disbelief.

"Are you... Are you seriously asking me that?" Will cleared his throat one more time, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Yeah, I mean. I want to know what's going on with you." It pained Mike every time he watched Will struggling to make a judgement on whether he could trust him—with information, with emotions, with anything really. He looked down and scratched under his jaw, attempting to hide his guilty expression.

"Um." Will ran a hand through his hair. "There was someone. But, it didn't work out."

"What was his name?" Will blinked twice before responding.

"Elliot."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out. You, um. You deserve to be happy."

Will swallowed, suddenly unable to keep Mike's gaze. "Thanks," he said, quietly. "It's okay. We just didn't have a lot in common other than, you know." Mike nodded. "Small town gay problems." Mike laughed then quickly checked Will's expression to make sure it was okay. He was smiling shyly, but clearly amused.

A somewhat comfortable silence followed, the only sound ice clinking in their glasses and the box fan in the corner plugging away, pushing the warm air around.

"Um," Will finally began, after several minutes of picking at an errant thread in his jeans. "What about you?"

"Oh, no, I'm, uh, single." Will nodded, neither of them able to maintain eye contact.

"That's surprising to me," Will said after a few beats. "You know, I always thought you'd have it easy in that... Department."

"Why?" Mike found himself genuinely uncertain as to what Will was trying to say.

"I dunno, Mike. You've always been kind, attractive. Straight. I guess I just assumed."

Mike felt a strange mixture of guilt and isolation. He didn't like the

idea of Will thinking of him as an ‘other’, but he supposed he couldn’t blame him. For all the world knew Mike was straight. The most ‘alternative’ thing about him was his love of comic books and role playing games.

“I guess it’s never been that simple,” Mike said quietly, self-consciously grabbing his right earlobe between his thumb and forefinger. Will sighed.

“Sorry, I’m being kind of a jerk,” Will said softly. Mike moved his hand closer to Will’s on the bed, brushing their pinkie fingers together. Will looked up at him uncertainly.

“S’okay. You have a right to be. I haven’t... I haven’t been a very good friend to you.”

Will swiped at a tear in his right eye with the heel of his palm and sniffed. “Mom says I need to work on not becoming bitter.” He tipped his head back against the wall and looked over at Mike, smiling sadly, his eyes glassy.

“I can’t imagine you bitter. You’re one of the sweetest people I’ve ever known.”

“Mike,” Will laughed, gently exasperated. “Stop being so nice to me.”

Mike just smiled affectionately back at him until Will got shy and looked away. He was thinking about the way he’d taste. The soft pink

of his lips and the way his eyelashes fluttered shut above his cheeks.

He almost felt himself begin to drift closer, an electric sort of sensation in the air between them. He suspected Will felt it, too. He could sense his breathing speed up, the heat rise in his face.

“I—I should probably get to bed,” Will said, breaking Mike out of his trance. “I have the early shift tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. For sure. Don’t let me keep you up.” Mike blinked several times before gently placing the portfolio down on the bed and getting to his feet.

“I’ll walk you out,” Will offered.

On the doorstep Mike hesitated. “Um. Tell your mom thanks again for me.” He reached out to pat Will on the shoulder and was surprised when he pulled him in for a hug. Mike closed his eyes and breathed deeply, letting himself relax into the embrace.

They stood there for what could have been 30 seconds or 30 minutes before Will released him, pulling away slowly. “I’ll tell her,” he said quietly.

“I’m excited. For our trip.”

“Yeah, Mike. Me too.”

"I'll call you soon," he added, walking backwards towards the car, unwilling to turn away from Will. He stumbled, just slightly, and broke into a grin. Will rolled his eyes, but smiled as well.

The following Friday he met up with Dustin and Lucas to plan out the final details for "the trip" (as they continued to call it). Lucas had, with Dustin's assistance, reproduced the path they took to the campsite a year or so ago in a mostly legible format.

"I can't remember the name exactly but I *can* tell you precisely where it is," Dustin said emphatically to an only somewhat reassured Mike.

They went to the grocery store together, taking turns riding on the grocery cart and picking up classic snacks from when they were kids, along with all the supplies for standard camping faire: hotdogs and s'mores components. Dustin insisted they swing back by his house and when they arrived he disappeared into the kitchen.

"Alcohol, the ultimate social lubricant," Dustin announced, as he returned to the living room and revealed two six packs of lite beer. Mike's eyes went wide at the word lubricant and Lucas laughed out loud. "What? It's what my mom says."

"OK, seriously, where did you get that, Dustin?"

"My mom, I *just* said."

“Your mom bought you beer?”

“Uh, I asked her nicely. She said it was fine as long as we weren’t driving anywhere. And you’re not, right?”

Mike shook his head.

“Your mom is crazy,” Lucas remarked through a mouthful of Nerds.

“She is not. She’s just... Cool.”

Mike took the beer, thanking Dustin and promising to pay him—or his mom—back. He hid it, somewhat guiltily, in the wheel well of his spare tire, covered it with the groceries, and drove home.

The house was empty when he arrived, Holly at a friend’s house and his parents on a “date night”. He could remember hating when they’d go out when he was a kid, hanging out with a weird babysitter all evening—that he always insisted he didn’t need. Then, when they got home, they always smelled funny—a scent he later recognized as alcohol and cigarettes, which was the eau de toilette of every bar in Hawkins.

He ate a lonely supper of leftover pizza and flipped channels mindlessly on the TV until Emilio Estevez and Ally Sheedy appeared. He pressed his cold soda can to the side of his face and watched as they embraced, before Judd Nelson strode off into the sunset to the sounds of Tears for Fears.

He switched the TV off and went upstairs to pack.

Mike had been thinking about kissing Will for two weeks straight. Ever since that first night he visited his room after work. When he looked into Will's eyes he felt the same warmth that he always had, but spiked with something else.

He'd be lying if he said his mind hadn't wandered there before. When Will first 'came out', he had a dream every night for a week that he and Will were reading comics or playing games in Castle Byers and suddenly their hands would brush together or their shoulders would touch. But it was never Will who initiated the kiss.

During the interim years his primary source of information about the Byers family was town gossip and their Blockbuster account. He frequently looked them up when he was bored and lonely at work and speculated about what rentals were Will's or Joyce's.

He spent a dark evening in the basement of his parents' home watching "An Early Frost" after seeing it pass through the Byers's account. It was a made-for-TV film about a gay man dying of AIDS that he contracted after his lover cheated on him. He cried silently for an hour afterward, tearing himself apart inside imagining Will watching it alone.

Now it was the night before the camping trip and Mike couldn't sleep.

He sighed, rolled over and stared down at Will's box sitting beside his nightstand. Abandoning the thought of sleep for the moment, he sat

up and pulled it into the bed with him. There was only one letter inside that he hadn't re-read yet: the note that accompanied the box itself.

He remembered the weeks leading up to its delivery quite well. It was late November of 1986 and there was this oppressive feeling in the air. The sky had threatened snow for days on end but the grey ceiling of clouds refused to break.

The mood at school was increasingly unfocused as students mentally checked out prior to winter break. Mike was no exception. Classes releasing early for study breaks and "reading days" just meant more time to waste money at the arcade and loiter outside the comic book store.

He was making his way down the hall after being set free from US history when he saw Will, rummaging in his locker. He opened his mouth to call out to him when two senior boys appeared with a plastic bag full of a dark substance and made a beeline towards Will. In an instant they had dumped the bag of dirt all over him, erupting in a fit of laughter and taunts of "zombie boy rises".

"Oh wait, wait. Don't cry, Byers," the tallest one said, waving a hand in Will's face, which was scarlet with a mixture of anger and embarrassment beneath a fine layer of soil. "Your fag boyfriend is here to help you."

Will looked startled, noticing Mike's presence for the first time. "He's not my boyfriend," Will said, quickly.

“What, did you break up? I’m sorry. Don’t worry, though. Sid can be your new boyfriend.” The stockier of the two stepped forward and grabbed Will’s jaw with one hand, making kissing sounds and laughing.

“Knock it off, shitheads!” Mike appeared surprised he’d spoken.

“The fuck did you say to me, Wheeler?” Things quickly devolved into a shouting and shoving match until Coach Wexler appeared and physically separated them, telling them he was going to kick every one of their asses if they didn’t shut the hell up.

“You don’t have somewhere to be? Get the hell out of this school. I see you in here again today and I’ll have you in detention until next Christmas. That goes for you too, Wheeler, Byers.” The older boys slipped away, and Wexler stopped and took a second look at Will.

“Jesus, Byers. Clean yourself up.” Will blinked away tears but remained frozen in place against his open locker.

Wexler sighed. “Look, Will. You just need to... Stop giving them what they want. Be a man, toughen up. They only treat you like a fairy when you act like one.” He patted him roughly on the shoulder before walking away, brushing the dirt off on his khakis.

Mike was terrified to look at Will, for fear he’d burst into tears or something worse, but instead he just looked hollow.

“Are you okay, Will?”

“Yeah.” He shook his head, sending dirt cascading to the floor, and brushed off his arms and legs with his hands. Mike just stood helplessly watching, not sure what to say or do.

“Maybe...” Mike began, then faltered. Will looked up at him, searching for something. “Maybe Wexler has a point.” Mike had grown to trust the coach during his year on the junior varsity basketball team. He wasn’t perfect, but he usually gave good advice, and he wasn’t cruel like some of the other coaches. Will huffed out a sad laugh in response.

“What’s the point of trying to hide it?” He asked, pulling his books out of the locker and shutting it. Mike leaned down and grabbed his dropped bag, but Will pulled it away. Mike looked at him confused, but he just turned and began to walk down the hall.

He followed him outside to the front steps of the school in silence. Will started to make his way towards the bus stop, but Mike called after him.

“Will, what do you mean, ‘trying to hide it?’”

“I’m gay, Mike.” Will said solemnly, just loud enough to be heard above the wind. Mike’s stomach dropped into his feet. He tried to grasp for a response for what felt like forever, but he just stood there with his mouth partially open until at last Will walked away.

“Will. Will, wait. Will!” But he hadn’t looked back.

What happened next was more gradual. Will avoided him at school for the remaining week or so before winter break. The one time they’d run into one another in the boys’ bathroom he had practically run the other direction.

Mike didn’t know what to do. Their relationship was strained further by the burden of the newly shared secret. The rest of the party could tell things were ‘off’ but when they tried to get to the heart of what was wrong, neither Will nor Mike would divulge much.

On the last day of school before the holidays, Will arrived to discover the outside of his locker had been completely defaced. Everything from ‘AIDS queer’ to ‘zombie boy fag’ in fat, black marker coated the surface.

“Shit, Will,” Dustin said. “Don’t worry, my mom has this stuff that she says can take—“

“It’s fine,” Will interrupted.

“What are you talking about, Will? We can’t let them write this shit.” Lucas stared at him in disbelief. Mike was silent.

Will shrugged. “They’re not wrong. I *am* gay. Queer. Whatever.” He stuffed his bag inside his locker and closed the door dispassionately. Dustin and Lucas shouted ‘what’ in unison while Mike stood behind them, fighting the urge to run.

Dustin shook his head. "Even if that's true, this stuff is still super mean, Will." He reached out to touch Will's shoulder but he flinched away.

"Anyway, I have to get to class," he sniffed. "I'll see you guys later."

Dustin stared after him in disbelief while Lucas turned to Mike. "Is this what's been weird between you two? You found out that Will is... Is..."

"Gay?" Dustin offered, seemingly unconcerned.

"I guess," Mike said quietly. Dustin fumed.

"Will is your best friend, Mike, what the hell?"

"Give him a break, Dustin," Lucas urged, looking shellshocked.

"No way. The party doesn't break up—for anything." He huffed before adding, "my uncle is gay and he's really nice. He even likes *Star Wars*!"

To explain why Mike was struggling with it so much was a different conversation altogether. The reality was, he had been observing certain things in himself he didn't recognize in the last few of years.

After basketball games, in the boys' locker room, he found his eyes lingering, examining different body types and appreciating some more than others. The sensation of another boy slamming into him on the court was mixed with something different. He knew he liked girls, but he found himself wondering if he liked boys the same way.

Confronting the idea of his best friend being gay felt like too much, on top of everything else.

"I... I don't know. Everything—It just feels different. I have to—I have to go. Sorry." Mike walked away as fast as he could without breaking into a run, blinking back tears of frustration.

Over winter break things were pretty quiet. He didn't hear from the guys at all until New Year's Day, when Will knocked on his door.

When Mike's mom called him downstairs, saying Will was there, his heart skipped several beats. He had no idea what to expect. He opened the door to Will decked out in what had to be Christmas gifts: a new sweater and an oversized scarf. A jolt of affection shot through him.

"Hey, Will," he said softly.

"Hi, Mike." Will was awkwardly clutching a box and struggling to meet Mike's eyes.

“What’s in the box?”

“Um, it’s for you.”

“Oh! Thanks, what—“

“Just, read the note. OK?” He hesitated for a moment before adding, “I have to go. Bye, Mike.”

Mike blinked in confusion as Will took off on his bike without looking back.

He carried the box inside and began to look through it. Inside were notes they’d passed in class, letters he’d written Will, drawings, and records of D&D matches. His mouth felt dry as he turned to open the letter labeled “Mike”.

January 1st 198 5 6

Mike -

I didn’t know how else to say this, so I decided to write a letter. I think that it would be easiest for both of us if we decided to not be friends anymore.

I am thankful to you for everything you did for me when we were little. I asked my mom and she said that ‘sometimes even people who love each

other grow apart'. I know you don't need someone like me in your life anymore, now that you know how I really am. I think maybe it will be easier for me too.

- *Will*

Mike flinched at the memory. He recalled running his fingers across the paper, touching where Will had scribbled out “1985” to write “1986” and the small dark spots of what he could only assume were dried tears. He also remembered the sensation of burning and tearing inside him, like something was being ripped apart.

His face flushed with hot shame and even a distant anger. He was furious with himself, with the world, and yes, with Will, too.

How could he take something away that was so precious? Just because Mike... He took a sharp breath and stalked back and forth across his bedroom, tugging at his hair with both hands. He had packed up the box as quickly as possible and shoved into his closet as deeply as it would go.

Once it was inside, he had lie down on his bed and stared at it, crying, until he fell into a fitful sleep. That had been the last day he spoke to Will for more than two years.

Now Mike folded the note up and placed it carefully back in the box. He lie on his back and cried silently, the tears rolling down his ruddy, irritated cheeks and pooling in his ears in a way that made him feel like he was underwater. A deep but un-refreshing sleep followed.

The next morning he packed up what fresh items he couldn't the previous night, loading the cooler with ice from the freezer. His mom ruffled his hair when she passed by him, knelt down on the kitchen floor, rummaging in a cooler.

"I hope you boys have fun. Just... Promise not to do anything illegal, okay?" Mike rolled his eyes.

"*Mom*," Mike huffed. "What would we even do?"

"I don't know, Michael, you have to admit you have a history of getting into things." She reached for the coffee pot and shook it. "Did you drink all of this?" She looked over at him in disbelief.

"No," Mike lied. She narrowed her eyes, but before she could say anything, Mike leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

"I gotta go. Love you, see you in a few days!"

"Oh—okay. Love you too, be careful!" She called after him, as the door slammed shut.

Mike monitored his speed carefully on the way over to the Byers's residence, frequently pulling himself back from flooring it all way. When he arrived he practically leapt out of the car. Joyce was on her way out, and she waved at him as she climbed into her own vehicle.

He was just about to knock when Will appeared in the window and gave a little wave to come in. Mike slipped inside and found Will's pack neatly prepped and waiting on the kitchen table.

"Hey," Will said with a smile. "I wanted to grab some books, if you don't mind?"

"Go for it. Oh, I have a little boombox as well, if you want to bring any tapes." Will nodded and disappeared into his room. Mike briefly considered following him, but decided to hover in the kitchen instead. He glanced around at the various scuffs and scrapes and other character marks the home had accumulated over the years. He'd certainly contributed to more than his fair share.

When everything was packed into Mike's Corolla, they both climbed inside. Will glanced at the empty backseat.

"Are we picking up Dustin and Lucas next?"

"Um, listen, Will..." Will knitted his eyebrows together. "Dustin and Lucas... Can't make it. On the trip. Lucas has this thing with early admissions in Berkley and Dustin's mom needs—"

"Wait, what?" Will's face fell.

"I kept meaning to tell you, but... I was worried you wouldn't want to go if it was just me."

“Mike,” Will chided, softly. He sighed and appeared thoughtful.

“Will you still come, Will? As a favor to me? It would mean a lot to me to spend some time with you and to try to, I dunno, make up for what happened. In a way.” Mike made use of his best pleading, doe-eyed expression.

“I—Mike.” Will looked skyward and then returned his gaze to Mike’s pitiful face. “OK. OK, I’ll still come.”

“Yes! Thank you thank you thank you,” Mike said quickly, giving him an awkward hug from the driver’s seat. “I’ll carry your pack for you, make all of the food, I promise.”

“It’s okay, Mike, you’ve convinced me,” Will smiled and it seemed genuine. It was like a wave of relief flowing over Mike.

“Cool,” Mike said with an irrepressible grin. He took a deep breath and turned the ignition.

They were on the road for about 45 minutes before Will asked where they were headed exactly.

“It’s this cool spot near a lake. Dustin picked it out actually.”

“Oh, wow. He must be bummed he can’t make it.”

“Yeah,” Mike said softly, his mouth dry. “Um, hey, do you mind if we stop up here for a quick bathroom break? Might be the last proper toilet for a bit.” Will nodded, looking amused.

The small truck stop had a surprisingly clean washroom, despite its filthy exterior. ‘Enjoy, Coke’ a rusted out ice chest encouraged from the side of the building as Mike wandered inside. When he emerged he found Will trying on trucker hats and eating a Blow Pop.

“What do you think?” Will asked around his sucker, gesturing to the cap that featured a conga line of the California Raisins.

“Cute,” Mike said with a smile. Will blushed slightly and put the hat back on the rack.

“Do you need to go?” Will nodded and he handed over the key, strapped to a novelty sized hockey stick.

Mike wandered the aisles for a moment before selecting a can of Coke from a large fridge and then doubling back to the front of the store to grab the California Raisins hat. When Will rejoined him he was outside, sitting on the hood of the car drinking his soda.

“I got you something,” Mike said, tossing him a plastic bag. Will caught it, just barely.

“What’s this for?” he asked, pushing his Blow Pop into his cheek.

“Happy graduation!”

He opened the bag and laughed. “Thanks, Mike.”

Mike reached over and took the hat, placing it snugly on Will’s head. Will exhaled, “I didn’t get you anything. Sorry.”

“S’okay,” Mike said, smiling down at him, not stepping away. Will said nothing, but cracked the candy shell of his Blow Pop with his teeth.

“Let’s get going.”

Back in the car, Will started popping the gum from his Blow Pop as he stared out the window.

“Will,” Mike groaned, glancing over at him with a slightly weary smile. “Stop.”

Will blew an exceptionally large bubble, leaned closer to Mike’s ear and popped it.

“Stop what, Mike?” Mike laughed.

It was another half hour before they arrived at the parking area. It was still early, thankfully, so the heat wasn't too oppressive. They both hefted their packs relatively easily—Will more easily than Mike.

“You packed a little heavy, huh?” Will asked as he watched Mike grimace and adjust the straps on his bag.

“I just—wanted to make sure—we had all the good stuff.”

“How far is it from here?”

“Not too bad, a couple miles.”

On the walk in they carried the soft cooler between them, gently swinging it back and forth. Will looked all around at the fields, humming with mid-morning insects. He observed the soft, white light of the sun before it took on the yellow haze of the afternoon.

Mike mostly watched Will. The sun in his hair, the sinew and muscles in his neck, the way he shifted his weight as he walked. All perfectly normal and yet somehow extraordinary. He couldn't remember the last time he'd spent this long in close proximity to Will.

They broke for lunch along the way, sitting on a couple of downed trees eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Some jelly escaped Will's bread, dribbling down his chin. He moved to wipe it off and caught Mike watching him. He looked at him quizzically.

“What’s... What’s with all the staring? Do I have something on my face—*other* than jelly?” Will asked, clearly amused but slightly weary.

“Nothing,” Mike said quickly. “I guess I just haven’t seen you much recently and I, um, miss... Looking at you?” Will nodded skeptically, narrowing his eyes and chewing slowly.

“You’re nice to look at, I mean,” Mike added, his voice getting quieter with each word. “I like it.” The words hung in the air as Mike contemplated the qualifications in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for ‘worst flirting’.

“Thank you,” Will said softly, wiping the corners of his mouth with his thumb and forefinger. He stood up and walked over to their discarded packs, glancing down at Mike, his mouth still full of sandwich.

He assessed Mike with an air of thoughtful appraisal, looking him up and down. “I think you’re nice to look at, too,” he said, before hefting his pack onto his back. Mike swallowed with some difficulty.

When they finally came in sight of the lake, Mike said they should make camp nearby. They found a clearing on the edge of the wood with a gathering of stones not far off—likely a camp someone had set previously—and started unpacking. Mike pulled out the small boom box first.

“Want to listen to something?” Will nodded and pulled out a handful of tapes. Soon the sounds of Pat Benatar filled the otherwise quiet afternoon air around them.

“Tent first?” Mike asked, removing the support poles and canvas. Will stretched and nodded, kicking some rocks and large sticks out of a nice, flat area. The sun beat down on them through the tree canopy, and Mike could feel rivulets of sweat running down his neck. He absentmindedly started to take off his shirt, but froze midway, remembering Will’s presence when he stood up from where he was pushing stakes into the ground.

“You okay, Mike? Do you need... help?” Will looked over at him quizzically.

“Oh, yeah, no, I’m fine. Just hot—sweaty, I mean. I was going to take off my shirt. Is that okay?”

“Uh, sure,” Will said, still uncertain, but now watching him with rapt attention. Mike finished awkwardly wriggling out of his t-shirt and lay it somewhat neatly over a nearby log. He was hit with a glaring wave of self-consciousness, not sure where to put his arms and painfully aware of how pale skinned he was. “Should you put on sunscreen?”

Mike laughed and Will looked mildly embarrassed, but the tension had diffused.

“Sorry. Too much time with my mom.”

“You’re probably right, though.”

They had the campsite setup in no time at all, working together with the same ease they always had. The last step was to roll out the sleeping bags and chuck the bedding in the tent. When it was done, Mike flopped down on his stomach and closed his eyes.

It was warm in the tent, but he’d slept so poorly the previous evening, that he found unconsciousness came to him easily. He had a fitful dream where he walked endlessly, trying to reach a destination he’d long since forgotten. When he woke up Will was reclining nearby, propped up on one elbow, reading.

“Hey,” he said softly, his voice raspy with sleep.

“You’re awake,” Will said with a smile, not looking up. Mike just blinked repeatedly, slowly returning to the waking world. His sweat had cooled and dried while he was sleeping, leaving him feeling refreshed.

“What are you reading?” he asked at length, reaching out to unfurl the cover, nosily, his long, angular fingers sliding beneath Will’s slender, graceful ones.

“Orson Scott Card,” Will replied, allowing Mike’s hand to gently pry the book from his hands.

“Any good?” Will hummed an agreement, lying down fully on his side. Mike examined the book for a few seconds before setting it down between them.

They lie still, studying each other’s faces. Will’s right arm lay with his hand extended between them. Mike reached out and touched the tips of their fingers together, sliding upward until their palms touched. It felt so familiar to Mike, memories of easy intimacy from when they were younger flashed through his mind.

Will let his hand drop and Mike held his breath for a moment, then, hesitating, Will reached for his curls. “Your hair’s gotten long,” he murmured.

“Yeah,” Mike said, enjoying the slight tug on his scalp as Will wound a finger through one of the dark ringlets. He reached over and grazed Will’s cheek with his knuckles, eliciting a small sigh, his eyes fluttering shut.

Will let his hand slide from Mike’s hair to the side of his face. Mike turned and pressed a kiss into the heel of his palm. Will took a deep breath through his nose, then sighed.

“What are we doing?” Will asked, almost pleading, refusing to open his eyes.

“Do you want to stop?” Mike asked, Will’s hand still cupping the side of his face.

“No,” Will said in a very small voice.

Mike slid closer, tentatively wrapping his arms around Will. He seized up at first, then relaxed against him, tucking his head under Mike’s chin. They lie like that for a while, Mike breathing in the scents and sensations of Will’s closeness—something he didn’t even really realize he *knew* until it was there again. Nostalgia and longing passed over him like waves.

After some time had passed, Mike suggested they go on a hike to check out the surrounding area and Will agreed, reluctantly extricating themselves from their embrace. Mike studied the map Dustin had given him before setting out.

They quickly found the small lake nearby, walking along the sandy shore. The water was still cool from the evening prior, not yet heated through by a long day below the Indiana sun. Mike pulled off his shoes and socks and dipped his feet in the water, dangling his legs off the side of the small dock. Will waded in up to his calves, trying to skip stones.

When he wandered closer to the dock, Mike splashed some water in Will’s direction. He whipped around with a small shriek, his expression a mixture of amusement and exasperation. Mike just grinned back at him and ducked when he threw a small pebble his way.

They wandered back to camp when Mike started to get hungry, picking up kindling along the way, letting their shoulders brush together occasionally.

“What’s for dinner? Don’t say peanut butter and jelly.” Mike laughed.

“Nope.” He thought for a moment. “Uh, quesadillas and chips and salsa.” He feigned hurt when Will failed to disguise an expression of genuine surprise.

The quesadilla were modest—just shredded cheese and flour tortillas. Will added some salsa to his before wrapping it in tinfoil and placing it on the edge of the fire as Mike had done.

When Mike was digging around for dinner supplies, he also rediscovered the beers Dustin had packed. He reached for one beneath the ice water pooling in the bottom of the cooler when Will appeared behind him, making him jump slightly.

“You brought beer?” Will seemed mildly scandalized.

“Oh, uh, yeah, did you—do you want one?” Mike asked, feeling the heat rise in his face.

Will shrugged. “Sure. My mom let’s me drink wine coolers sometimes.” Mike laughed.

“What? I guarantee they taste way better than *this*,” he said with a small, self-effacing smile, before cracking open a can of beer, taking a sip, and blanching at the taste.

Mike felt a slow but steady meter of relief set in as he finished his first can of beer and started on his second. Will was smiling more freely, giggling as they poked their tinfoil wrapped quesadilla with sticks and snacked on tortilla chips.

When they'd finished eating dinner they'd also killed their first six pack. Will diligently used a small pocket knife to cut apart the six pack rings—watching this filled Mike with a surge of tenderness.

They continued drinking, staring into the fire and talking softly, giggling occasionally and tossing little scraps of plant matter and small stones into the fire to see how it would react. At length Mike looked over Will, unable to stop smiling.

“Will.”

“Michael,” Will replied, taking on a serious expression that lasted several seconds before they both started giggling.

“Will. Will, I'm serious.”

“I'm serious too!”

“I'm serious-er. I'm more serious.”

“Ok. You win, I'm listening.”

“Will,” Mike swallowed audibly. “Can I kiss you?”

Will’s chin slipped out of his hand and he fell over onto his side. “*What?*” he squeaked from his newfound position on the ground.

“Are you okay?” Mike lurched forward to help him up at the same time Will attempted to right himself, resulting in their heads knocking together so hard that Mike’s vision flashed black for a second. They both groaned and fell back onto the sandy soil of the campground.

Mike clutched his face with his hands and shook with laughter. He looked over at Will, who was holding a hand to his head as well and looking at him wearily. Mike rolled over onto his side and scooted closer to Will.

“You’re not... Joking, are you?” Will asked quietly.

“No,” Mike said in a rush. Then, more gently, he added, “sorry, this isn’t how I wanted this to go. I didn’t expect Dustin to pack all those beers.”

“Wait, you *knew* they weren’t coming? They knew? Do they know about *this*? Who else—” Will’s panic level seemed to be rising, so Mike reached out and gently covered his mouth with three fingers.

“They don’t know anything, really. Just that I wanted to go on a camping trip with you to spend some time alone and apologize for... For being such a huge asshole to you. All the other stuff is just between you and me.” Will knit his brows together but remained silent.

Mike pulled his hand away and covered his face, which had contorted into a pained expression.

“God, I’m fucking this up again,” he groaned and sat up. “I’m really sorry, Will. Look, let’s just go to sleep and I’ll take you home in the morning—“

“Wait.”

Mike hesitated. Will slowly sat up, clutching his head with one hand. “Oof,” he said quietly. “You didn’t let me answer your question.”

“What... What question?”

“Yes. You can...” Will pulled his knees to his chest and looked down at his shoes for a moment, “Kiss me. If you want.”

Mike’s heart jumped into his throat. Will met his eyes and for a moment and they stared back at each other silently. Mike scooted closer, reached out with one hand to touch the side of Will’s face. He flinched slightly at first, then relaxed under Mike’s touch. He tipped his head forward and rested his forehead on Will’s.

Mike had kissed girls before. Well, girl. He had kissed El many times during their brief relationship before transitioning back to being close friends. Each time felt like a tiny jolt of electricity, a mix of excitement against a backdrop of something unknowable. He took his thumb and ran it along Will's bottom lip.

Mike leaned in and Will's eyes fluttered shut. He pressed their lips together. Uncertain at first, until Will responded, wrapping his arms around Mike and pulling him closer. There was a warm sensation that emanated from every point of contact between them. It felt as though it was deeper than just flushed skin against skin—like it was seeping into his bones.

Will tasted like beer and salsa, but he also tasted like something else. There was a distinct flavor, just on the edge of Mike's recognition. Like a song's melody, played without the lyrics. He realized as their mouths parted and they deepened the kiss that the taste could only be described as *Will*.

At length they broke apart, breathing audibly. Will took in Mike's somewhat awestruck expression and let out a small laugh before quickly apologizing. Mike just smiled so broadly his cheeks hurt before darting in to give Will another peck on the lips.

"Want another beer?"

They spent the next hour or so watching the fire die, drinking, and kissing in between bouts of rapid-fire conversation, retracing all the moments they'd missed in each other's lives while they'd been estranged. Like their embrace had severed the last line of defense

they'd erected between them, and all the affection and the passion that had been such an integral part of the relationship before came rushing back in.

When the embers were almost dark, Mike leaned forward and dumped the remainder of his beer onto them, snuffing the last flames out with a hiss.

"Such a Boy Scout," Will teased. Mike reached out and grabbed at him playfully.

"I'm gonna go take a leak. See you in the tent?"

"Yeah."

Mike wandered into the brush to urinate and tried to contain his drunken glee before returning. He found Will in the tent, struggling to keep his eyes open.

"Sleepy?" He asked as he spread out his sleeping bag to bridge the gap on the tent floor.

"Yeah," Will murmured after a long blink. "Do you remember that one campaign we played that went for 13 hours, and how at the end I fell asleep on the sofa before we could get out our sleeping bags?" Mike smiled fondly.

“I remember we all crept around trying not to wake you up until Dustin tripped and knocked over the entire card table.” Will shook his head and smiled. Mike leaned forward and kissed him lightly, but before he could pull away Will wove his hand into his curls and pulled him closer.

They kissed for several minutes before Will pulled away and fell onto his back. He reached out and patted Mike squarely on the face. “Too much to drink,” he smiled, blearily. Mike whined.

“I just want to keep kissing you, is all.”

Will thought about this for a moment before resuming their embrace in earnest. They whiled away an indeterminable amount of time this way, kissing and rolling around on the nest of blankets and sleeping bags inside the tent, breaking away periodically to giggle or catch their breath.

At some point the two fell asleep in a tangle of limbs and linens. Mike woke first the next morning, his arms around Will and his face pressed into the back of his neck. His mouth was dry and his head ached slightly from the alcohol, but he couldn't deny a certain giddiness that spread out from his center to the ends of each limb.

He carefully extricated himself from Will, covering him with a blanket and doing his best to slip out of the tent unnoticed. It was chill outside and the air was moist, but it was clear it would be another warm and languid Indiana summer day. Mike started a fire with the remains of the previous evening's kindling and went about making breakfast—pancakes squeezed from the cut corner of a Ziplock bag.

He had hoped to surprise a sleeping Will with pancakes, but his rummaging around and the sounds and smells of cooking woke him and lured him outside the tent.

“Good morning,” Will said, suddenly slightly shy. Mike beamed at him.

“Hey! Breakfast is almost ready.” Will wandered closer and stood next to Mike, staring down into the cast iron pan. Mike wrapped an arm around his waist and kissed his stomach, making Will shiver.

They ate in relative silence when everything was done, dunking pancake pieces into a small jar filled with maple syrup Mike had liberated from his family’s home. Will yawned several times before admitting he wished he’d brought coffee.

“You’re probably just dehydrated from last night,” Mike suggested, offering him the cup of water he’d be drinking from. Will rolled his eyes good-naturedly but accepted the water.

“I appreciate the water more than the the nagging,” Will chided, gently. Mike just laughed.

After a while longer of yawning and blinking sleepily at one another, Mike stood up and extended his hand to Will. Taking it, he led him back into the tent and flopped down on the pile of blankets and sleeping bags. Will joined him, making a small ‘oof’ sound as he hit the ground.

They shifted around until Will's back was pressed against Mike's front, his arm across his waist and his face buried in Will's hair.

"The other night, when you came to my house for dinner. Were you..." Will hesitated. "Did you think about kissing me?"

"Yeah," Mike said, unabashedly.

"Wow," Will mused. "I really thought I was imagining things."

"Rest assured, from now on, you are never imagining me thinking about kissing you, because I'm going to be doing it 24/7." Will laughed but Mike could feel the heat rise in his face, his skin prick with goosebumps. He placed a few kisses behind Will's ear, on the nape of his neck, and his bare shoulder.

"Mike..." Will began, before hesitating for a few moments. "What are we doing?"

"Um," Mike felt his stomach churn a bit, not quite ready to answer this question. "Spooning?" he offered. Will snorted and rolled over to face him.

"I mean, this," he gestured between them. "The kissing and stuff. What—what does this mean?"

"I don't know," Mike answered, honestly.

“Sorry, I know this is like... A nightmare conversation to have, but I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Mike frowned. “I’m sorry. I—I could have given some more thought to how I was feeling beyond wanting to...” He trailed off, studying Will’s face.

Will shifted upward so that he was above Mike and slid his arms around his shoulders. He tipped his head forward and kissed him, soft at first, then more deeply—opening his mouth and pushing Mike’s head back.

Mike rolled off of his side, pulling Will with him, now straddling his stomach. They kissed for a while longer before breaking apart, breathing heavily. Mike felt dazed.

“Is that what you wanted?” Will asked, sitting up and pushing aside the curls that had fallen in Mike’s eyes. Mike squirmed, relishing the sensation of Will’s weight pressing him into the floor of the tent.

“Um, yes,” he said, breathlessly ineloquent. With some effort, he pushed himself up and Will slid into his lap with a soft laugh. “But, other things, too,” he added, his voice shifting into a more serious tone.

“Like what?” Will asked, tracing a small circle on the back of Mike’s shoulder with his fingertip.

“Like... Just, spending time together again. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too,” Will said, stifling a yawn.

“Do you still wanna take a nap together?” Will hummed an agreement, sliding off of his lap in a way that made him feel somewhat lightheaded.

Mike lie back and pulled Will close. He wrapped his arm around his back and Will rested his head on his chest. The last thing he remembered before falling asleep was the soft smell of soap and sweat and sunscreen.

The heat woke him up some time later. The sun was beginning to drift west but was still beating down, even through the sparse clouds and the scattering of tree branches overhead.

“Warm,” Will murmured, stirring as well.

“Yeah. This humidity is ridiculous.”

Will glanced up at him and smiled, amused. “It’s making your hair very... Unique.”

Mike laughed. “Mean,” he added with a small pout.

"I like it," Will amended, reaching up and running his fingers through Mike's curls, touching his scalp in a way that made Mike shiver involuntarily. "What do you want to do now?"

"Let's eat lunch." Will laughed. "Hey, you asked."

"Shouldn't we spend time in nature or something?" Will wondered, stretching and rolling away before sitting up.

"We can do that *and* eat lunch at the same time."

"Mmhmm."

They packed their food to go, deciding to make a loop around the lake and see where it took them. The lake and the woods and the fields were alive with sounds, hums and clicks and hisses of late summer. It was July still, but there was a hint of decay in the air as the dramatic growth of spring began to slowly fade.

When they veered close to the edge of the lake, Mike grabbed a flat stone and tossed it at the water. He winged one to three skips; Will managed five.

"This is why you always kick my ass at video games," Mike mused. "Better spacial reality skills." Will just grinned and kept walking, intentionally bumping his shoulder into Mike's.

After a while Mike reached over and brushed their knuckles together before gingerly taking Will's hand in his.

"This okay?" He asked, suddenly nervous. Will nodded.

They found several large stones clustered together where the trail split off, leading down to the lake's edge, and decided to stop there for lunch. Mike revealed the menu: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, part two, and chips.

"Mike, did you pack this food or did your ten-year-old self do it for you?" Will teased.

"Well if you like this, you're going to love what's for dinner."

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Hotdogs, macaroni and cheese, and s'mores—of course."

"Of course." Will ate his sandwich contentedly, before adding, "that actually sounds really good."

On the walk back they collected kindling, kicking around for dry pieces. Mike found an enormous downed branch and picked it up, carrying it for a while along with the rest of his collection, despite

Will's protests.

"I'm not going to be the one to explain to the park ranger why we tried to burn Indiana down."

Daylight was beginning to fade from the sky when they finally arrived back at the camp site. They piled their kindling near the makeshift fire pit, and Mike pulled out the hotdogs, boxed macaroni and cheese, and s'mores supplies.

They cooked in relative silence, sipping Cokes and listening to the wood in the fire pop and hiss as it burned. When it came time to prepare s'mores, Mike insisted it was best to light the marshmallows on fire first.

"The black crust makes them crispy and balances the sweetness." Will blushed.

"Whatever you say, Julia Child."

"Who is that?" Mike asked, earnestly.

Will laughed and after some resistance let Mike feed him a piece of "blackened" marshmallow.

"Want to go for a hike?" Mike asked as Will finished his last s'more, awkwardly crushing his graham crackers down over his

marshmallow.

“Now? It’s super dark.”

Mike felt weirdly energized, anxious to move. He glanced up at the sky. The night was fairly bright, a large, waxing moon and a clear sky full of stars shone down on them.

“Let’s go for a swim, then,” Mike said excitedly, pulling off his shoes and socks.

“Uh, I didn’t bring any trunks,” Will hesitated. Mike pulled off his shirt.

“Just swim in your shorts.”

“I don’t know...” Will muttered, but he followed him through the wood and to the end of the small dock’s landing on the lake. Mike turned towards him, winked, and fell backwards into the lake. Will laughed and then shrieked when Mike burst back through the water’s surface, splashing him.

“Mike!”

“What?” Mike asked, feigning innocence. Will rolled his eyes. “C’mon. Swim with me. Please?”

Will sighed and then smiled down at him. “Fine.”

“Yes!” Mike cheered, leaning back and allowing himself to float. He watched as the water moved gently in the breeze, the crest of every small wave reflecting the white light of the moon.

Will stripped down more slowly, and Mike did his best not to watch him too intently. He had filled out since they were younger but he was still on the small side. His limbs were long and lean, but his chest was full, not sunken like some thin guys he’d seen.

“It’s rude to stare,” Will chided, kicking some water in his direction before sliding off the side of the dock.

“Not staring. Admiring,” Mike corrected.

Mike could feel more than see the heat rise in Will’s face at his comments. He closed the gap between them, kissing Will softly, tentatively at first. He tasted like summer—Coke and s’mores and just a hint of woodsmoke.

Will put his arms around Mike’s neck, leaning into him, pressing their bare chests together. He tipped his head back as Mike deepened the kiss, his hands sliding down to the small of Will’s back.

After a moment more, Will pulled away.

“Don’t,” he said softly.

“Don’t... what?” Mike asked, heart sinking.

“Don’t kiss me like that if it doesn’t—if you don’t—“

“I’m just...I’m still trying to figure things out, Will...”

“I’m not some sort of toy you can experiment on. I’m... I *was* your friend! If you need to ‘figure things out’, do it with someone else.”

“You *are* my friend,” Mike choked out, his eyes stinging with tears.

“Friends don’t...Do this. Whatever *this* is,” Will seethed, gesturing between them. He stormed away determinedly, as quickly as he could in waist deep water, gripping the waistband of his wet shorts to keep them from sliding off.

Mike blinked away tears and waited a few moments before climbing out of the water, gathering their things, and heading back to the campground. He found Will dripping wet and sitting on a log near the fire.

“I didn’t bring a towel,” Will muttered, miserably. Mike disappeared into the tent and emerged with his towel, wrapping it around Will’s shoulders.

"I'm sorry. About before," Mike said quietly, staring into the fire.

"S'okay."

"No, it's not. I'm not... I want this to be good for you too."

Will studied his face for a few moments.

"I don't know if I want this for *you*."

Mike frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You don't know what it's like, Mike."

Mike sighed.

"So, tell me." He paused before adding, "please."

"It's different for me. I grew up knowing I was sensitive and different and whatever. I didn't really fit in with other boys, but things between you and me were always easy. Stuff changed, though. And you turned out to be..." Will trailed off and swallowed loudly before continuing. "Very conventionally attractive, which made it really difficult. Difficult, for me." They both sat in silence for a moment,

faces burning, before Will continued.

“I couldn’t focus on my school work, art, comics, anything. All I could think about was you. And I couldn’t talk to *anyone* about it!”

“You could have talked to me,” Mike said, softly.

“No,” Will said, louder than he had intended. “No. You were the last person I could talk to. You were my best friend. All I knew for certain was that sharing any of this with you would ruin... Everything.” Mike opened his mouth to speak but Will cut him off, “and don’t try to tell me that it wouldn’t, because that’s exactly what happened!”

Mike fell silent, his eyes shining.

“Ever since I have had to live with seemingly being the *only* ‘out’ gay person in all of Hawkins. Where the most the average person knows about being queer is b-roll of HIV/AIDS victims on the 10 o’clock news. I didn’t ask for this!”

“I’m sorry, Will. I know, I know...”

“Do you know?” They were both crying now, tears streaming down their faces.

They were silent for what seemed like forever to Mike, except for the occasional sniff. At length he reached out and touched Will’s hand,

intertwining their fingers together.

“Will, can I hold you? Please?” Will sniffed and then nodded.

Mike slid over next to him on the log, wrapping his arms around him tightly and burying his face in his damp neck. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, over and over, periodically punctuating his apologies with a kiss. Will sighed.

“What if we make a deal?” Will asked, quietly. Mike gave him a gentle squeeze to let him know he was listening. Will took a shaky breath and continued. “What if we agree to just spend time together, catching up, and... Doing whatever else we want.” He swallowed audibly. “And then, before it’s time to leave, we can decide what—what happens after.”

“You would be okay with that?” Mike asked, pulling back slightly so he could see Will’s face in the dim firelight. Will shrugged.

“I think so.” He shook his head. “I mean, yes. I think we should. I want to know if it’s real.”

Mike kissed him lightly on the lips and then tipped his forehead against his. “Me too.”

They sat quietly for a time, Will’s head tucked under Mike’s. At length Mike stood and doused the remains of the fire and Will, dry at last, pulled on the t-shirt and socks Mike had rescued from the dock.

They settled into the tent, but Will stayed awake for several hours, reading a book called *Songmaster* by the light of Dustin's borrowed headlamp. Mike lie still and observed him breathing, blinking, and turning the page until his eyes fluttered shut.

The next morning Will was less somber, and happily held hands as they hiked out. During the drive home they chatted like they used to when they were kids, Mike guiding the conversation and Will the Wise filling in the details.

When they arrived at the Byers home, Mike helped Will carry his bags into the empty house and then found himself lingering, uncertain if he should or if he wanted to go to his own home. When Will disappeared into another room, he examined the piles of books on his floor: a mixture of fantasy and titles Mike didn't recognize. Anne McCaffrey and J. R. R. Tolkein were stacked with names like Christopher Isherwood and John Rechy. He picked up a novel called *The Swimming Pool Library* and thumbed through it.

"You can borrow that one, if you want," Will said as he reappeared in the doorway, making Mike startle and jump.

"Th-thanks." Mike's face flushed when he realized Will was fresh from the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist.

"I'm just going to—"

"Oh, shit, sorry," Mike stepped aside as he realized he was blocking

Will's path to the closet. "I won't look." Will laughed.

As Will stepped past him Mike's senses were flooded with the warm, wet, and lingering smell of shampoo and soap. He resisted the urge to turn around and was wondering if he should leave when Will's arms snaked around him from behind. He was radiating heat from the warm shower, and when Mike lifted his wrist to his lips he tasted sweet.

"Stay for a little while?" Will murmured into his shoulder. Mike squeezed his arm in affirmation.

They settled on Will's bed together, Mike lying astride the mattress while Will rested his head on his stomach. They both read for some time before Mike broke the silence with a question.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Hmm," Will chewed the inside of his lip.

"What?" Mike asked again, in a singsong voice.

Will sighed and smiled at Mike wearily. "I was thinking about how I've imagined this before. The two of us... Like this," He laced his fingers with Mike's but dropped his gaze. "I guess I just didn't really believe it would ever happen."

Mike took his free hand and ran it through Will's hair, petting him gently. At length he said, "I'm just glad it's happening now."

Mike lingered at the Byers's well into the evening. He was wondering if he should go when he heard the front door open and Joyce's voice all through the house for Will. Will, who had apparently been dozing more than reading his book, startled and sat up.

"Oh, hey," he said softly. "I think I fell asleep." Mike looked down at him affectionately.

"Your mom's home."

Will rubbed his eyes and slipped off the bed just as Joyce entered the room.

"Hey, boys," she smiled. "I wasn't sure if you'd be back yet, but I brought some Chinese. Mike, you're welcome to join us, of course."

"Thanks, Joyce," Mike said, glancing at Will with a hint of uncertainty. He nodded and smiled.

"Look at your sun-kissed faces," Joyce cooed, gently, touching Will's cheek. "I can see every freckle on you, Mike. I hope you wore sunscreen," she chided, playfully.

"Mom," Will said softly, with only a hint of exasperation.

They ate takeout in contented silence around the dinner table, Joyce periodically interviewing them about different parts of their trip. Mike had sat closer to Will than he'd realized, and did his best to hide his surprise when Will pressed the side of his thigh against his. He reached under the table with his left hand and gave his fingers a squeeze.

"When do you leave for Purdue, Mike?" Joyce asked as they cleared the table.

"Um, not until the end of August." She nodded.

"Will is the same. We found him a little apartment up there, another student's who's graduating, so his move-in date isn't until the first of September."

"Oh, that's cool. I wish I could live off campus for my first year. I'm in this communal dorm thing."

"I think you'll like it. Sometimes living together is a great way to make friends." She touched his shoulder in a reassuring manner as she walked by, grabbing a bottle of wine from the cupboard.

"I should probably get going," Mike said, trying to catch Will's eye at the sink. "Thanks again for the food, um, Joyce." He smiled at her.

“Any time, Michael.”

“I think I left something in your car, so I’ll walk you out,” Will said, toweling his hands off.

As they stepped outside, Mike held the door open for Will, who looked at him for a few beats before offering him a gently skeptical smile.

“Hey, I didn’t know you were getting your own apartment, that’s really cool.”

“Yeah, I’m excited about it. It’s small but Mom has a lot of ideas about how to make it nice.” He took a breath before adding, “you should come visit me. You know, if you want.”

“Yeah, that would be nice,” Mike said with a shy smile, taking Will’s hand and linking their fingers together.

When they reached the car Mike leaned his back against it and pulled Will closer. He relaxed into the embrace, laying his head on Mike’s chest.

“You still smell like a campfire,” he said softly, not opening his eyes. Mike gave him a little squeeze.

“Thanks for coming on this trip with me. I don’t know what I would

have done if you said 'no'," his voice trailed off.

"I don't think I could have said 'no'," Will murmured. Mike leaned forward and kissed him, Will pushing up off of his heels to meet him.

"Too short," Will murmured, giggling.

"Nah. Just right."

They embraced for several more minutes before Mike pulled away, tipping his forehead against Will's.

"Can I come see you after work tomorrow night?" Will nodded.

"Bring a movie?" He asked with a grin. Mike laughed.

"Definitely."

On the drive home, Mike's head was spinning with a million different thoughts. His plan had worked, better than he had imagined. Will was back in his life. But now he had to figure out how to untangle the snarl of knots that was his emotional state. What did he want from Will? Friendship? Love? Kissing—sex?

He swallowed nervously, ears burning, reminding himself to take deep, slow breaths. Pulling into the driveway he saw that his home was already dark, except for the reading lights in his parents' bedroom. He deposited a bag of trash directly into the bin outside,

mostly full of empty beer cans, and snuck inside, hoping to avoid an interrogation from his mother on how things had gone.

He fell down face first onto his bed when he had made it upstairs, sighing deeply. He knew he should shower but suddenly the bathroom seemed like it was miles away. The light flush of sun on his face made him warm and sleepy, and his eyes fluttered shut. He just managed to kick off his boots before drifting off on top of all his bedding, fully clothed.

For the next several weeks, like clockwork on evenings after closing, Mike appeared at Will's window. He was always accompanied by a couple of VHS tapes, a VCR, and some only-recently-expired candy from the stockroom of Blockbuster. Sometimes they began kissing as soon as he was part way through the window. Other times they watched movies intently, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the small screen of Will's hand-me-down TV set.

He slept over most evenings, unable or unwilling to detach himself from Will. He'd tried to hide his enthusiasm a bit the first few nights, not wanting to put Will off, but when he tried to leave one night when Will had the early shift the next day, he pouted and pleaded with him to stay.

"I won't keep you up?" Mike asked, suddenly anxious.

"Nah. If anything, I sleep better with you here," Will had murmured against his neck, already dressed in his (Star Wars themed) pajamas.

"O-okay," Mike had acquiesced, secretly relieved—the same was true

for him.

The weeks passed quickly this way, Mike's life increasingly a blur of work and Will, with little time left for much else. He tried to ignore the undercurrent of anxiety he had about the future, as their dates of departure from Hawkins edged closer and closer.

One morning toward the end of August, Will and Mike both woke with a start to a couple of quick knocks on the bedroom door.

"Hey, Will?" Joyce's voice floated in from the hallway. Will's eyes widened slightly and Mike mouthed the word 'sorry' before rolling off the bed and onto the pile of blankets and sleeping bags on the floor with a soft thud.

The door swung open slowly and Joyce popped her head in.

"Hey, Mom," Will said, his voice slightly slurred with sleep. "What's up?"

"Just letting you know I was headed to work! I forgot you were here, Mike, sorry." She bit her lip, just a little, and smiled. Mike gave a small wave in response. "I'm working a double shift so I'll be late coming home tonight, but there's leftovers in the fridge, OK?"

"Thanks, Mom."

“Love you, sweetie,” she called as she stepped out of the room, hesitating for a moment before pulling the door all the way shut with a soft click. When they heard her car turn over outside Mike finally exhaled.

“Oh my God,” Mike breathed. Will scooted over to the side of bed and looked down at Will with a small smile.

“Good morning,” Will murmured, ignoring Mike’s gentle panicking. Mike propped himself up on his elbows.

“Good morning, yourself.” He reached out and grabbed Will’s arm, tugging him closer. “Come down here.”

Will slid off the bed onto the pallet of sleeping bags with a soft ‘oof’ sound. Mike rolled onto his side and pinned him against the side of the bed, kissing and nipping at his neck until he squirmed and squeaked and they both broke away laughing.

“I have to tell you something,” Will said, slightly breathless from giggling. “Promise you won’t be upset?” Mike made a small noise of agreement. “Mom knows about us... Sort of.”

Mike’s eyebrows shot up and he felt a small surge of adrenaline. “About... The stuff?”

“‘The stuff’, Mike, really?”

Mike rolled his eyes good-naturedly before leaning forward and sliding his hands under Will's t-shirt.

"She knows about *this*?" He asked, directly into Will's ear before nibbling it, making every hair on his body stand on end. Their eyes met and Will's expression was slightly dazed. He pushed his fingers into Mike's hair and kissed him softly at first, then urgently. Mike pressed their hips together experimentally and Will took in a sharp inhalation of breath.

"Hard," Will murmured into Mike's mouth, tightening his grip on his dark curls before pulling away and rolling onto his stomach, breathing heavily. "Sorry, sorry."

"Too much?"

"I liked it, but, yeah. A little too much..." He trailed off, shakily. Mike kissed him on the tip of the nose.

They lie on the floor, face to face, until one or both of them drifted off again. When Mike next opened his eyes it was to a bowl of cereal swimming in milk. He rolled onto his back and smiled up at Will.

"You have to get up and eat it before it gets soggy," he said as he seated himself in the nest of blankets. "At least that's what my Mom always threatens me with."

“Soggy cereal is terrible, to be fair,” Mike said, groggily rubbing his eyes. They ate their breakfast in a contended silence until Will cleared his throat.

“Um, so, about what I was saying earlier. About my mom. She’d been asking me about you and how we’d been hanging out more and, I don’t know, I guess, I just didn’t want to lie to her. So I told her the truth.”

Mike nodded, heat rising in his face. “What did you say?”

“I told her that we were... Dating? I guess? Just messing around felt weird to say to her,” Will trailed off, looking down at the thread he was picking out of an old blanket. Mike frowned.

“We’re not ‘just messing around’, Will.”

“What would you call it then?” Will asked in a small voice, still not meeting Mike’s eyes. Before he could answer, the shrill ring of the Byers’s home phone cut through the air. Will jumped to his feet to go answer it, and probably not to escape the tense conversation they were having.

Mike groaned and tipped his head back against the side of the bed. He listened to the muffled sound of Will’s voice from the other room, wracking his brain for something to say that wouldn’t make him sound like a total asshole. Will returned shortly, crossed the room to his bed, and flopped down face first.

“What’s up?” Mike asked, climbing up next to him.

“I have to go in early. Stacey called out,” he said directly into the mattress. Mike reached out and ran his hands through Will’s hair. He tensed at first, then rolled into the caress, pressing his back against Mike’s front.

“Hey.”

“Hi.”

“Nothing I ever do with you is ‘just’ anything,” Mike whispered into his hair.

Will was quiet for a moment then responded, “I feel the same way. But... We need to talk about stuff. At some point.”

“I know,” Mike said quietly. “I could come see you after work tonight?”

“Your mom won’t think it’s weird you’re spending the night at mine so much?”

Mike made a noncommittal sound and squeezed Will until he let out a small squeak and they both laughed.

Mike dropped Will off at work an hour or so later, giving him a chaste kiss in the passenger seat. Will sighed, but smiled back at him.

“I’m so ready for my last day here.” Mike nodded sympathetically, although he wasn’t looking forward to their imminent departure from Hawkins—at least not so long as they were headed to completely different places, hours away.

“Just one more week,” he said, putting on his best cheerful expression. Will nodded, kissed him once more, and slipped out of the car.

Mike’s Blockbuster shift felt like the longest one to date. Another weekday evening alone, and things were exceedingly sluggish. He wiped down the counters and was even beginning to clean the shelves—something they *never* did—when the first customer he’d had in over an hour entered, the chime of the door obnoxiously cutting through the silence.

“Welcome to Bl—oh, hey,” he said softly when he saw his mother’s face.

“Oh! Mike, I didn’t know you were working tonight. I thought you were over at Will’s.” She smiled kindly but looked genuinely surprised.

“Oh, yeah. This is my last week, but still a few more shifts left.” She sighed.

“God, I can’t believe that. Next week you’ll be away at Purdue and we’ll all just be here, paying full price for Blockbuster rentals again.” Mike rolled his eyes, laughing. “Of course we’ll miss *you* too, sweetheart,” she reached out and ruffled his hair.

“Mom!” Mike groaned.

“Although honestly I don’t know when’s the last time Holly or Dad have seen you, you’ve been out so much. What have you and Will been doing, anyway?”

“Uh, nothing much, just watching movies, mostly,” Mike said, his mouth suddenly dry.

His mom nodded, although her expression indicated she wasn’t entirely satisfied with that response.

“You know, you never did tell me what happened with you two. Why you stopped hanging out. Or why you started again, for that matter.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, his voice suddenly unusually high. He cleared his throat. “It’s kind of a long story.”

“Well, you know you can always talk to me, right?” Karen gave her best reassuring smile.

“I don’t really have all the details myself, to be honest,” he said,

laughing weakly. Even if he had mostly worked out his feelings—at least what he wanted to say to Will—Mike was in no way ready to confront the idea of telling his parents. His mother's response terrified him the most. He blinked several times, lost in thought.

His mother checked out a few romantic dramas, *Bull Durham* and *Mystic Pizza*, the former on Mike's recommendation.

"Maybe your father will actually watch this one with me, since it's about baseball," she said with a soft laugh, although Mike could tell her loneliness was real.

"I'll watch it with you some time, if you want," Mike offered.

"I'd like that, sweetheart."

When Mike finally locked up, he felt like he was about to drop. He'd slept fine the night before, but that morning's wake up call had been fairly anxiety inducing. When he arrived at the Byers's he'd barely finished knocking when Will appeared, wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt and holding a box of pizza.

"Hey—" he began, smiling, before Mike leaned forward and kissed him, relief surging through him at the sight of Will's face. Will giggled when he pulled away, reaching up to touch the side of Mike's face. "Miss me?" he asked, softly.

"More than I thought I could in less than 12 hours." A faint blush

colored Will's cheeks as he pulled Mike inside.

"Do you want—"

"I'm ready to talk about things. Us." Mike blurted out as soon as the door had shut behind him. Will looked startled, anxiety etching itself into his features. "I mean, I thought about it—you, or, us, a lot. And I know what I want."

"O-okay. Um, do you want to eat something first?" Mike nodded, uncertain but starving. Will set the pizza box down on the kitchen table and hugged Mike, draining some of the tension out of him.

"Sorry. Nervous."

"It's okay," Will said softly, place a kiss on his collar bone. "Me too, honestly."

They settled on the sofa with slices of pizza, Will's legs across Mike's lap. They turned on the TV and flipped through the channels, but nothing was on. After he was finished eating, Mike rubbed Will's socked feet, eliciting a contented sigh. At length Will looked up at him, reaching over to squeeze his shoulder.

"Do you want to go talk in my room?" Mike took a deep breath and nodded.

They settled together on the bed, sitting with their backs against the wall. Mike bit his lip and began.

“These last few years, I’ve just felt... Hollow? Like this really important part of me had just vanished and nothing I did could replace it.” Mike studied his feet as he spoke, unable to meet Will’s eyes. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking.”

Will moved closer to Mike and looped his arm around his, resting his head on his shoulder. Mike could smell the distinctive bouquet of the Myers residence, cedar and laundry detergent.

“I loved El—Jane. But things with her always felt like a fire that was burning and swallowing everything. Looking back, knowing I was one of the only positive things in her life *ever* when we met, it made sense why we bonded so strongly and then sort of... Drifted.” He felt Will’s grip on his arm tighten slightly at the mention of Eleven, but before he could say anything he added, “what I’m trying to say isn’t about her, okay? I know you’ve probably heard me talk about her enough for a lifetime.” Mike took a breath and held it for a moment.

“What I want to say, what I’m doing a bad job of saying is... Is that it’s you. You are what’s missing in my life, Will.” Mike looked down into Will’s eyes and smiled weakly.

“I’ve missed you in my life too, Mike,” Will said softly.

“And it’s scary. It’s really scary because...” Mike stopped speaking for a moment and rubbed his face with both hands, blinking away tears. “I don’t want to fuck it up. I don’t want to run you off again because

I'm so... *Shitty* at this stuff."

"You're not shitty at relationships, Mike. You're one of the most compassionate people I know. That's why it was so hard when things got messed up. I just didn't know what to think. You've always been the one to fix it when it got broken. I guess I usually just... Give up."

Mike lurched forward and wrapped Will up in a hug so tightly that he could feel Will's fingers digging into his skin through the back of his shirt. When they pulled away Will took Mike's face in his hands, gently wiping his tears away with his thumbs.

"I love you, Will."

For the first time in years Will looked up into Mike's face with this pure, gentle expression of total affection. When he was younger Mike had seen it so often he thought that was how Will looked at everyone. But after everything they'd been through—his parents' divorce, the Upside Down, the shadow monster—all of this terrible bullshit, it was like seeing the clouds part and the sun shine after one hundred years of darkness.

"I love you too, Mike."

Mike let out a shaky exhalation of breath and Will reached up and pushed a curl away from his eyes.

"Will, would you—do you want to be my boyfriend?" Will nodded.

“Do you want to be mine?”

“Yes,” Mike said, his voice still thick with tears. They kissed, but Mike was so mentally and emotionally exhausted he felt like he could barely keep his eyes open.

“Do you want to just lie together for a while? You don’t have to stay all night, if it’s weird...”

“No,” Mike fought through a yawn, “I want to stay. I told my Mom I’m sleeping at Dustin’s, for variety.” Will rolled his eyes good-naturedly.

“OK. I’m going to go take my meds, I’ll be right back. Don’t fall asleep yet,” Will urged with a small smile. Mike gave him a thumbs up and yawned cheerfully.

Mike sat up after a moment and tugged his shirt, jeans, and socks off and snuggled underneath the quilt on Will’s bed. He fought to keep his eyes open until Will returned, dressed in lightweight pajamas and carrying a glass of water. He smiled and spread his arms wide.

“Hang on, hang on.” Mike made a noise of displeasure and dropped his arms. Will quickly shut off his desk lamp and slid under the covers, squirming close to Mike, who draped his arm over his side.

“Goodnight, boyfriend,” Mike whispered into the crown of Will’s head. He felt more than heard Will chuckle, the last sensation he could remember before drifting off.

Some time later, Mike awoke to the soft sound of the door to Will’s room opening. In the faint light of the moon he saw Joyce’s face peer in. She no doubt continued to check on her sleeping son nightly when she arrived home from work, after almost losing him not once, but twice, to the ephemeral threat of the Upside Down.

He tensed at first, afraid of how she might react, but found he couldn’t bring himself to pull away from Will’s soundly sleeping form. Their eyes met, and for a moment he panicked, but then she smiled. A small, but hopeful expression that he returned in kind.

Six weeks later, Mike stood at a counter near the post office in the Purdue student union scribbling away on a sheet of paper. He bobbed back and forth on his heels excitedly, clutching a packet of paper and balancing his book bag on one shoulder. He pulled out an envelope and a stamp, pausing to re-read the letter.

September 17th, 1988

Dear Will,

Guess what? I just bought my ticket to Chicago!

OK, probably you already know, because I’m going to call you as soon as

I get back to the dorm, but it's still cool to get mail, right? Also, I found this hideous postcard of our weird mascot Purdue Pete and knew I needed to send it to you.

Things here are going OK. My dorm mates are kind of assholes but I'm trying to 'make an effort' (my mom's words, not mine). Classes make me feel like my head is going to explode about 30% of the time, but the computers and other technology they have here are amazing.

I can't wait to see you and check out your apartment and all the new art you've been making. It's nice hearing your voice, but I really miss your face.

Love you,

Mike

He licked the envelope and sealed it and then, before placing it in the mailbox, he gave it a quick kiss.

After he'd dropped the note in the outgoing slot, he slipped through the crowds and stepped outside into the quad. The weather was turning cool at night, the leaves on the trees were changing. On the air he could sense a shift in pressure, like something was pushing and pulling all at once. He pulled the hood up on his jacket and started the long trek across campus.